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A.I.: Artificial Intelligence

Abstract

This is a review of *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence* (2001).

A.I. is the latest offering from Steven Spielberg, who wrote and directed the film after adopting it from the late Stanley Kubrick. The influence of each visionary is clearly evident; *A.I.* exists somewhere between the warm amiability of *E.T.* and the cold silence of *2001 - A Space Odyssey*. In many ways, however, *A.I.* is more ambitious, albeit ultimately less successful, than either of those films. Viewed from a religious perspective, it aims thematically at the very roots of human existence and the fundamental nature of human character.

The story takes place in the distant future in which a group of scientists have invented the ultimate in artificial intelligence - a robot that knows how to love. Their first creation is David, played by Haley Joel Osment who mastered playing the "unique boy" in *The Sixth Sense*. As the tagline states, "David is 11 years old. He weighs 60 pounds. He is 4 feet, 6 inches tall. He has brown hair. His love is real. But he is not." This seemingly simple premise, of humanity creating a being for the sole purpose of exchanging love, is of extreme spiritual significance. The prevalent belief in the Christian tradition is that God created us to love him. In *A.I.*, the human beings create a being to love us, and a being created in our own image nonetheless. From a theological perspective, the film is not about the future, a monumental leap in technology, or even about the nature of love. This is Genesis revisited, except this time we are the deity. In creating David, humanity makes the ultimate attempt at playing God.

In the story of Genesis, God creates humankind and humankind turns against God; this is usually called the Fall. Normally, in stories about human beings playing God (such as *Frankenstein*, *Bladerunner*, *2001*, and even the original *Terminator*) humanity creates an intelligent life and then that life becomes monstrous and turns on humanity. This theme is so common it deserves a name; to coin a phrase, this will be referred to as the Frankenstein effect. The Fall and the Frankenstein effect are thematically the same - the creation turning against the creator. To explore this theme further in either film or prose is dangerous artistic territory - only a talented storyteller can successfully navigate the minefield of clichés. Though it fails at times as a cohesive story, *A.I.* certainly merits bonus points for uniqueness; the film is anything but thematically redundant and cinematically formulaic.

One of the fresh and unique aspects of *A.I.* is that it presents the opposite of the Fall and a complete reversal of the Frankenstein effect. In this story, David doesn't turn on humankind; in fact, the creation instead displays some of the most noble of human virtues. In *A.I.*, it is human beings, the creators, that turn against the creation. The story is actually three distinct stories in one, and each segment reveals a different aspect of humankind's betrayal of his creation. In the first section of the film, David's adoptive mother learns to love him but ultimately sends him away. In the second segment of the film, David struggles to escape persecution and

violence from the very people he was created to love. In the film's third and final act, David's god (i.e., humanity) is absent altogether. From an existential and cynical perspective, this progression from banishment to torture to absence could be viewed as a representation of man's relationship to God. Many philosophers, amateur and professional alike, have concluded God to be either cruel or nonexistent; without taking a huge leap of imagination, *A.I.* could be seen as an exploration of such a perspective.

If this film is about humankind playing God, what kind of god are we humans portrayed as? At times in the film, humanity is portrayed as neurotic, fearful, and ambiguous at best in how we treat our creation. In one scene, a stadium of people cheer as humanoid robots are butchered and destroyed like junk cars at a monster truck rally - the festival is known as the "Flesh Fair." This scene is something of a cross between a lynch mob and "Battle Bots" (a current television program in which machines battle each other to the point of destruction). Displayed here is the mixture of sadism, violence, and fear that humankind has manifested not only this film but also in countless real-world acts of fear-fueled mayhem from witch burnings to inquisitions. Part of what makes the Flesh Fair segment so chilling is that it seems altogether possible and, especially in light of the "Reality TV" fad that so titillates our voyeuristic and sadistic tendencies, even eerily familiar. In this scene and others, the human race comes off as a wicked god indeed.

Despite the chillingly negative portrayals of humanity in *A.I.*, the character of David ultimately offers a tribute of sorts to humanity's more noble side. This tribute is particularly manifested through David's quest to become a genuine person, to be "a real boy" like Pinocchio before him. In this pursuit of human status, David becomes the embodiment of all uniquely human virtues—loyalty, love, devotion, and the willingness to make any journey and sacrifice to be with the beloved, even if but for a single day. In *A.I.*, humanity is alternatively a poor god and a magnificent creator.